Preshow: The Dictionary of Lost Words

Hello and welcome to the Audio Introduction of *The Dictionary of Lost Words*, adapted for the stage by Verity Laughton from the novel by Pip Williams.

This World Premiere production is presented by State Theatre Company South Australia and Sydney Theatre Company.

The Audio Described performances will take place at at 6:30pm on Tuesday 3rd October and at 2pm on Saturday 7th October and at the Dunstan Playhouse at the Adelaide Festival Centre.

The performance runs for 3 hours with one interval.

There will be a sensory tour 1 hour prior to each of the Audio Described performances, and the audio describers will commence introductory notes 15 mins before each performance commences.

The play is set in the world of The Scriptorium. In 1901, the word *bondmaid* was discovered to be missing from the Oxford English Dictionary. *The Dictionary of Lost Words* is the story of the girl who stole it.

Motherless and ever curious, Esme spends her childhood in the Scriptorium – the “Scrippy”, a converted garden shed in Oxford where her father and a team of lexicographers guided by Dr James Murray are gathering words for the very first Oxford English Dictionary. She hides beneath the sorting table and catches a word on a “slip” as it falls and soon, she finds other words that have been neglected by the men. Here begins Esme’s collection of her own: the Dictionary of Lost Words.

As the years pass, Esme realizes that little importance is placed on recording the words and meanings relating to women’s experiences and as her world expands and her circle of friends grows – actresses, suffragettes, market traders, workers, she realizes the power in their silenced voices and decides to lend them hers. And on the way, she comes to understand the many meanings of the word “love”.

This is a period piece set over the span of a 100 years from the 1880’s to the 1980’s.

**CONTENT warning**  
Contains strong coarse language, haze and adult themes. If you or anyone you know needs support, you can contact [1800RESPECT](https://1800respect.org.au/) (1800 737 732), [Lifeline](https://www.lifeline.org.au/) 131 114, or [Beyond Blue](https://www.beyondblue.org.au/) 1300 224 636.

1. Set description

The set is a modern take on ‘The Scriptorium’, or ‘Scrippy’ featuring a white floor and a tall, wide arc of white pigeonholes each about 20cms square running around the stage. The bank of cubes is 36 across by 11 high; objects, various papers and ‘slips’ occupy the many pigeonholes. A central flight of stairs follows the arc of the pigeonholes and rises to a wide upstairs mezzanine walkway that spans the width of the arc, with exits at either end. A large white screen traces the length of the curved mezzanine, providing a backdrop on which images are projected.

Two hidden doors are located on either side of the central stairs among the pigeonholes. A wooden hat and coat stand is pushed up against the pigeonholes on the left. A large central rectangular wooden table is the focus of the scriptorium. The ‘sorting table’ is populated with well-ordered piles of papers, boxes, and books. In the middle of the table a desk lamp with a small black shade hides a camera which functions as a real time overhead projector, its images projected at scale across the mezzanine backdrop like a modern wide screen television.

There is a small trolley with two shelves for the volumes of the Oxford English Dictionary, and four additional tables with turned legs on castors. Two square tables are positioned at either end of the sorting table and two rectangular desks sit along the edges, one either side. A standing desk, or lectern, also on rollers, is to the right of the sorting table. Four dark bentwood chairs and two wooden stools complete the set.

The stairs lead up to Lizzie’s bedroom on the upper right, where a small white bed is pushed against the wall. Beneath its iron frame sits a brown travel trunk and a small square box for Lizzie’s things.

Key locations are created by moving the furniture and utilizing additional props (often drawn from the pigeonholes) as well as the images, words, and icons projected across the upper level.

Various homes are created by the simple movement of tables and chairs, sometimes rolled back against the pigeonholes, alongside a chair or two.

***The Covered Market, Oxford***, is created as stall holders bring on baskets and boards displaying their wares, they set up their stalls over the ‘Scrippy’, selling fruits, vegetables, and breads. The flower seller balances her buckets of blooms on a wooden wheelbarrow. Mabel upends a small wooden crate to display her small carvings.

Chairs placed side by side create the ***New Theatre, Oxford*** and following the theatre, they frequent ‘***The Eagle and Child’*** pub. The pub is entered from the upper level via the stairs, the ‘sorting table’ becomes the bar, and two square tables angled on either side are inviting spaces at the local.

The compositing room of the ***University Press, Oxford*** has the feeling of an expansive factory. The upper level creates a corridor and foreman’s view of the factory floor, the compositors quickly set type at their individual workstations.

Other scenes include demonstrators meeting at ***The Martyrs’ Monument*** which is simply and effectively suggested by the speaker standing on a tabletop at left of stage. Projected above is a postcard of The Martyrs’ Monument and four dice that side-by-side, proclaim the year 1912. Scenes of Esme’s Boarding School, and picnics alongside the Oxford Canal near Walton Well Bridge occur on the upper level. The atmosphere is enhanced via the real time projections that are managed by the actors themselves, they drive the story with objects (manipulating the dice for the years) and other material items including parts of their own bodies, such as hands and eyes.

The music is filmic and underscores the emotional journey of Esme, drawing on familiar folk tunes and universal themes to reflect the inner life of a young woman in a coming-of-age story. Sound and lighting are integral to the production, instantly transporting us to different settings, creating moods and reprising themes.

The lighting rig is extensive, the scriptorium can be backlit, so that light shines through individual pigeonholes creating points of interest, or the whole becomes a flickering screen as people pass to and fro behind the set. At other times grouped pigeonholes are lit to suggest panes of glass in doorways and windows. On a moonlit night the entire bank looks like dark cobblestones. Sometimes the light plays across the entire set creating pulse-like slow motion or dream-like sequences.

The receipt of a letter is also an interesting vignette within the play, the actor ‘reads’ the letter on one side of the stage, the writer stands opposite delivering the words; this creates a ‘cameo’ effect, as both actors are spotlighted against a darkened stage evoking an oval shaped brooch from an earlier era.

1. Cast, Characters and Costumes

The play begins in the 1880’s and costumes are all of the period as the story spans the next 100 years.

We first meet **Esme Nicholl**, played by Tilda Cobham-Hervey, as a precocious 4-year-old in the Scrippy. She is dressed in a white, lacey, long-sleeved dress and white lacy knickerbockers, with a wide dark green tartan sash tied in a large bow around her waist. She has black woolen stockings and flat black shoes. Her auburn hair frames her face in tight ringlets gathered in a large green tartan bow on top of her head. At 6 years old, Esme wears a dark green tartan jacket over the top of her white lacy ensemble. Her right hand is badly burnt in a fire and she wears a dark leather bandage on that hand from that point on. At 12 years of age, the large bow has gone from her hair, which is still in tight ringlets. Esme wears a white blouse tucked into a long dark green tartan skirt that matches her jacket. She sports a small brown soft leather satchel on a long strap hanging over her shoulder. By 16, Esme wears a fitted green tartan waistcoat and necktie over the white blouse and long skirt, her ringlets now tamed and swept back from her face in a soft bun. As an adult, a full length fitted light green overcoat and matching dress hat are added when Esme goes out.

**Harry Nicoll**, played by Brett Archer, is Esme’s father. He was widowed at Esme’s birth and at times finds raising a child on his own a challenge. He is dressed in a brown 3-piece suit with a dark tie, and a gold fob watch chain across the front of his waistcoat. While in the Scrippy, working as a lexicographer, his jacket, bowler hat and cane hang on the coat stand and he works in his shirt sleeves. His sandy hair is kept short and neat, and he has a trim moustache. He is industrious and serious, loves his daughter deeply and mourns his late wife.

Rachel Burke plays **Lizzie Lester, Mrs Smythe, and Maria**

**Lizzie Lester** is the Murray’s maid. She wears a long light grey dress with long sleeves, a white apron and mop cap. She adds a grey woolen shawl and a grey hat when she heads out to the market. She is not much older than Esme, and in many ways is like an older sister, filling in the gaps where Esme’s father has been unable to provide adequate instruction.

**Mrs Smythe** is an abortionist. She wears a long grey skirt, white shirt, and a brown and cream plaid jacket with wide lapels and cinched at the waist with a grown belt. Her hair is swept up in a stylish bun.

**Maria** is an Oxford suffragette

**Sir James Murray** is played by Chris Pitman. He wears an academic hat and a light grey academic dust coat over a dark 3-piece suit. He has a full grey beard and moustache, neatly trimmed, and round wire-rimmed glasses. He is very focused on his monumental task of leading the lexicographers to collate the first edition of the Oxford English dictionary.

Ksenja Logos plays **Ditte, Mabel, Megan, and Alice**.

**Ditte Thompson** is Esme’s godmother. She is an historian and linguist. She wears a dark brown skirt suit, with a long full skirt, with a deep hem of lighter brown and a brown check bustle, with a fitted brown jacket over a crisp white blouse, dark necktie, and a brown hat. She has dark wavy hair drawn back in a bun at the nape of her neck, a kindly face, and a gentle disposition.

**Mabel** sells small wooden carvings at the Open Market and offers a bawdy introduction to a broad new vocabulary for the young Esme. Mabel is wrapped in many layers of tattered clothes – a grey, brown scarf over her head, and red woolen shawl around her shoulders, red and purple skirt and a blue apron.

**Megan Brooks** is Esme’s elderly daughter. She wears a colourful knee-length skirt, cream shirt and a pink long sleeveless open cardigan. Her hair is pulled back into a low bun and she wears dark-rimmed glasses.

**Alice** – an Oxford suffragette

Raj Labade plays **Gareth Owen and Mr Crane**

**Gareth Owen** is a lead compositor at the Oxford University Press. He wears dark trousers, a white shirt, waistcoat and a tailcoat. He has dark wavy hair and sideburns and is cleanshaven.

**Mr Crane** is a lexicographer working in the scrippy.

Angela Mahlatjie plays **Tilda Taylor, Sarah, and Frederick Swetman**

She has dark skin a round face with full cheeks and a curvy figure.

**Tilda Taylor** is an actress. When about to step onto stage she wears a white bodice and full skirt, with a pink shawl draped around her shoulders, her black hair in ringlets under a large pink had festooned with feathers. When not performing she wears a stylish black frock coat with a fur collar, her hair swept up in a stylish bun under a smart hat. She is also an activist suffragette

**Sarah Brooks** is a friend of Ditte, who adopts Esme’s daughter. She wears a dark dress, with a dark woolen shawl wrapped around her shoulders.

**Frederick Swetman** is a lexicographer in the scrippy. He wears a mid-brown suit with a fawn waistcoat and has straight short black hair and a black moustache.

Anthony Yangoyan plays **Bill Taylor and Arthur Maling**.

**Bill Taylor** is Tilda Taylor’s younger brother and her manager. He is very charming. He wears a brown suit and dark waistcoat.

**Arther Maling** is an assistant lexicographer and an Esperanto speaker.

1. Creatives

**Creative Team**

Playwright: Verity Laughton

Author: Pip Williams

Director: Jessica Arthur

Designer: Jonathon Oxlade

Costume Designer: Ailsa Paterson

Lighting Designer: Trent Suidgeest

Composer & Sound Designer: Max Lyandvert

Assistant Director: Shannon Rush

Accent Coach: Jennifer Innes

Intimacy & Fight Coordinator: Ruth Fallon

Production Manager: Gabrielle Hornhardt

Stage Manager: Jess Nash

Assistant Stage Manager: Carmen Evans

**Getting to the Venue**

Adelaide Festival Centre is easily accessible by [public transport](http://www.adelaidemetro.com.au/), including the tram (stop at Railway Station), trains, buses and a [free bus service](https://www.adelaidemetro.com.au/Timetables-Maps/Special-Services/Free-City-Services) that operates on a loop throughout the city and North Adelaide with stops on the corner of King William Road and North Terrace.

This completes the audio introduction for The Dictionary of Lost Words.

Your Describers are Kari Seeley and Jules Fielke.

For more information on audio described performances please contact Access2Arts using the email address [audio.describer@access2arts.org.au](mailto:audio.describer@access2arts.org.au)